Executive Summary

Economy - a word of necessity not of choice in today’s rural economies where the poverty level dictates what products can and cannot be afforded for low income families. Our project is to create a greater access to Public Computer Centers to individuals, families, students and volunteer firefighters whose income does not support except the most basic of items. Additionally, to also provide for the primary first line of defense for rural areas, our volunteer fire departments, with real-time communication to assist in emergency situations both locally and statewide. To assist in creating better trained firefighter personnel with online training and certifications, allowing them to attend classes without having to travel to the nearest official training center located in Baton Rouge. Being a volunteer in a rural area means you must work a full time job to support your family financially, while giving up personal time to support your community. Travel for training or to comply with certain requirements for being a better trained volunteer, often means loss of income and time away from regular employment to meet these criteria.

Rural communities, often below the poverty level or low income, support their local institutions by volunteering. They assist the local volunteer fire department, public library or their local school. While rural areas are economically challenged, they give whole-heartedly of their personal time and talents to support the facilities they do have access to and utilize. With the downturn in the overall economy, places like the public libraries are being heavily trafficked as a less expensive alternative for information, education and recreational needs.

a) This program will allow the more rural areas to have access to broadband technology at a rate/cost more reasonable than their incomes will currently allow otherwise. The level of poverty and low income most rural areas face make even the most basic of necessities difficult to afford. A Public Computer Center program will allow children and adults visiting libraries, and senior citizen centers access to computers they wouldn’t ordinarily have because necessities must come first. It will impact a school library that doesn’t have any computers at this time, or very few computers for its student population. Everyday government and business entities utilize computers, computer technology and the internet for communication, business transactions, classrooms, online training and continuing educational courses or informational purposes. The need to not only provide access, but provide the computers and
broadband system alleviates the burden of those communities who work diligently to support themselves. The rural communities support their Volunteer Fire Stations through physical attendance and donated time. This grant would impact the everyday lives of those low income families who struggle daily. In effect, this grant would provide the opportunity to ensure no one truly needing access is left behind technologically.

b) By placing the Public Computer Centers in public libraries, schools and school libraries, senior citizen centers and fire stations, this gives the public immediate access for real time communication, statistics, online training, continuing education and critical information. It allows the general public “connectivity” with the fast paced informational systems that our society currently uses to conduct business on a daily basis, and which they ordinarily would not be able to afford. By utilizing existing facilities which already have a public attendance, the project will expand the usage of the public computer centers for the greatest impact for access and success, cost effectively increasing the use and attendance of existing facilities twofold.

c) Rapides Parish is comprised of 1,362 square miles which is a 100% rural area. This grant will have an impact on an area that is 95% unserved and 5% underserved by this current technology. Areas that are currently unserved are 34 Rapides Parish communities, only 9 of which are incorporated entities by Census Bureau standards. The cities of Alexandria and Pineville are the 5% underserved areas. The population that could potentially be reached is approximately 126,339. At Senior Citizen Centers the attendance is a monthly average of 350 combined for all centers, with at least twice a week attendance; and for schools they are 24,310. The estimated users for the fire departments are 211, and the potential number of broadband subscriptions outside the public centers being 17,000. The Rapides Parish Public Libraries show a 31% increase in circulation from the 2000 figures for all branch circulation transactions of 811,097 for 2008 (Statistical Summary of the Rapides Parish Library system April 2009).

d) The 9 member Rapides Parish Police Jury brings a combined number of 51 years of Police Jury experience into the current organization and have established a strong unity in the pursuit of progress for Rapides parish. They are dedicated to revitalizing the Rapides Parish economy, inviting new business creation and encouraging new business growth, while supporting current businesses with expansion if necessary and possible. The Broadband opportunity combined with the Public Computer Centers would allow them to leverage the already high usage of their public library branches.

e) The number of potential jobs that can be created by the Public Computer Centers installation and maintenance for Rapides Parish are no less than 7 permanent full time employees. This number includes installation and maintaining the system for approved sites.
f) The overall cost of the computers and installation is estimated to be $310,661.